

“Picked flowers will wither, captive butterflies will die, chicks of an eagle could fall from their nest if disturbed. Therefore touch nature with your heart only.”

– From the Tatra National Park visitor guide



Rocky Mountain National Park and Tatra National Park in Poland sign sister park agreement

National Park, which contains two Parks — one the Polish side and one on the Slovakian side.

Tatra National Park, spanning across the border of Northern Slovakia and Southern Poland, was acknowledged long ago as a unique and delicate area. The Park is home to some of the world's most interesting plants and animals, enjoyed and preserved under national park status.

The Tatras, formed between five and 20 million years ago, represent a fairly young mountain range featuring a geological composition of granite and crystalline schists, numerous cliffs, cirques (valley heads) and mountain lakes as a result of major glacial action and erosion that took place over several different time periods. These massive peaks, often compared to the Rocky Mountains (“tatra” means “rocky” in ancient Slavic), are home to many varieties of flora and fauna and, in addition, continue to support all of its native predators including bear, lynx, marten, fox and wolves. Temperatures are comparable to those in Estes Park, with snowfall in the winter being about double what it is in the Front Range.

With mirroring landscapes and wildlife it is easy to visualize these two majestic mountain ranges as sisters, despite being a world apart.

Officials from Tatra National Park and RMNP made this connection with the sister park agreement, which has drawn much enthusiasm. It is evident that the interest and support was in place before the agreement came about.

Martina Pilatova and Stanislov Hudec, visiting park rangers from Tatra National Park on the Slovakian side, have been volunteering for RMNP since August. In addition to volunteering their expertise, the pair has been actively studying the similarities and differences between the parks, sharing their experiences and observations with American rangers and scientists as well as enjoying their time traveling.

“Two years ago the director from Tatra came here to the Rocky Mountains,” said Pilatova. “We both like to travel so we asked the volunteer coordinator here at Rocky Mountain National Park and came for personal interest.”

Back home in Slovakia, both Pilatova and Hudec work for the Tatra National Park full-time. Pilatova earned a university degree in ecology and says she has always had a love for the mountains and nature. Hudec, holding a degree in forestry, has a similar interest and thanked his grandfather for igniting his passions early on.

“My grandfather took me to the forest often as

Tatra chamois from Tatra National Park vary from the Rocky Mountain wildlife, but enjoy similar habitat.

By Becky Weller

Well known for having some of the highest peaks in the Carpathian mountain range, the Tatras are one of the most treasured and visited areas in Europe. It is home to Tatra National Park, where millions of visitors each year take advantage of what this wild and breathtaking area has to offer.

On Sept. 12, Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) officials and ambassadors met in Zakopane, Poland to sign an agreement that would establish a sister park relationship, providing a gateway for increased international support between Rocky Mountain National Park and Tatra

a child,” said Hudec (translated by Pilatova).

Previous to the Park's existence, the Tatras were used for sheep grazing and mining, ultimately resulting in overdevelopment and exploitation. In order to prevent further damage to the landscape, the first European cross-border national park was founded. In 1948, Tatra National Park on the Slovakian side was established with the Polish side following in 1954. In addition, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared the Tatras a member of the international biosphere reserves in 1993. This program seeks to protect and preserve the natural environment through international effort and cooperation.

Now with the sister agreement in place, both Tatra National Park and RMNP will be able to learn from one another and benefit from increased interest and efforts. Both Pilatova and Hudec view the agreement as a positive relation-

ship, as it may provide further opportunity for exchange programs for rangers, scientists and volunteers.

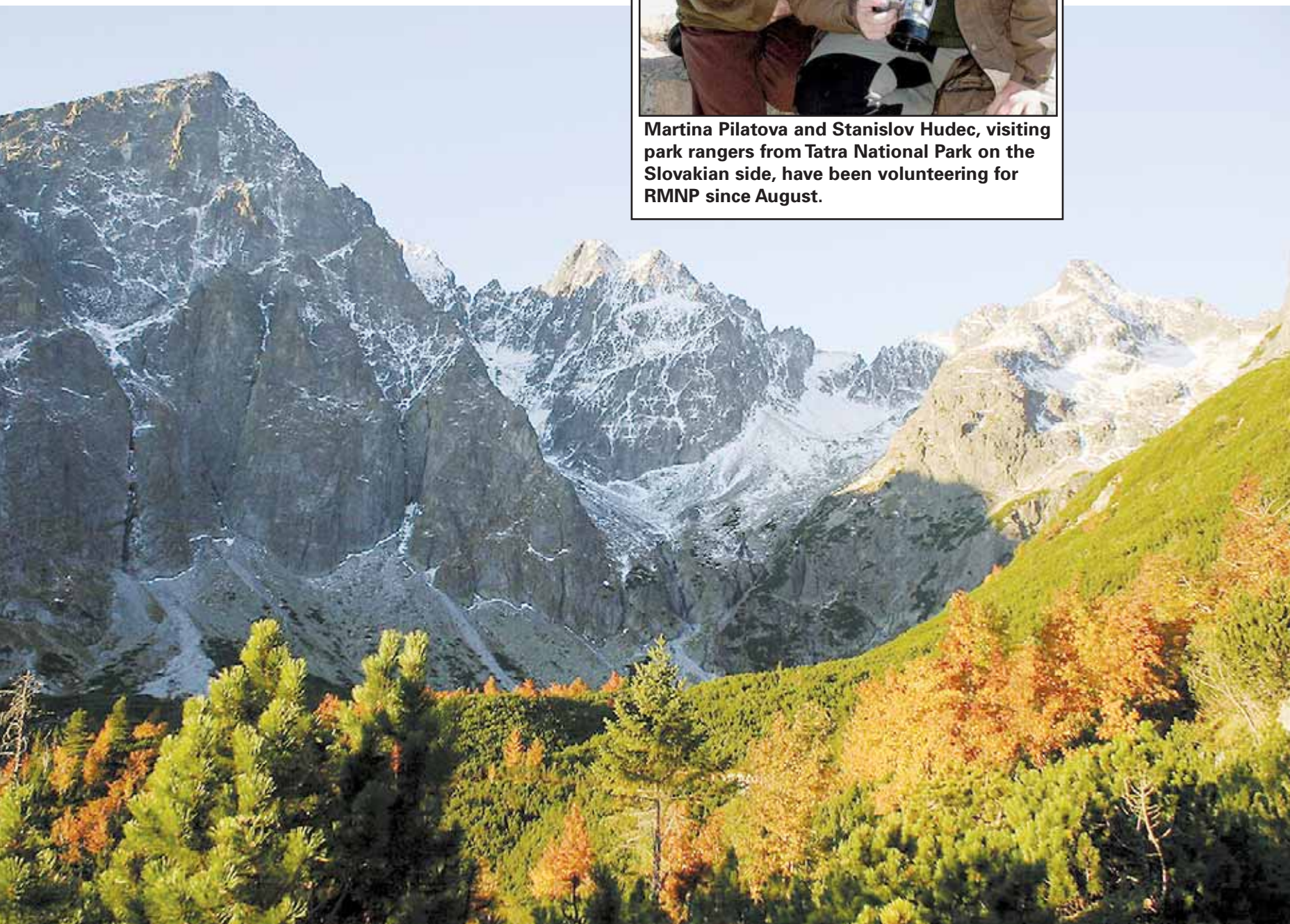
“We like this environment very much,” said Pilatova. “We like the people here so much. They are very friendly and we enjoy hiking on our days off. We would like to come back so that we may work in different positions here at RMNP.”

According to Pilatova and Hudec, Tatra National Park is currently one of the most popular parks to visit in Europe

with year-round tourism reaching well over five million people. Unlike RMNP, the Tatras are currently home to several privately owned ski resorts, which add a great deal to the winter season. However, since the Tatras feature peripheral roads that do not always snake into the interior, many viewing and hiking areas are inaccessible for vehicles, forcing most of the park's summer tourists to spend more time hiking on trails and less time in their vehicles. In contrast, RMNP experiences a higher summer and fall volume simply because of more vehicle tourism.



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“In Slovakia most tourists are serious hikers,” said Pilatova. “We have less cars but the same amount of tourism because of skiing in the wintertime. Here in (RMNP), we hike every chance we get. At Tatra you must get up very early to hike because the trails are so crowded. Here we have room to hike. It's very nice.”

While RMNP focuses on more traditional tourism activities such as sightseeing, hiking, cycling, cross-country and backcountry skiing

and snowshoeing, Tatra offers a different group of activities for its visitors. In addition to the activities already mentioned, Tatra National Park visitors are also able to participate in pastimes such as gliding, paragliding and, of course, alpine skiing in the winter. However, while individuals are permitted to camp in the backcountry (pending a permit) at RMNP, visitors at the Tatra Parks are restricted from setting up camp. Instead the parks offer stays in huts that are already placed in

designated sites. This helps avoid any unnecessary damage hikers may cause when going off-trail.

When it comes to conservation with respect to tourism, both parks focus on education and enforcement. At RMNP, tourists are expected to “leave no trace except for footprints” and to take nothing except “photographs and memories.” Tatra National Park lives by a similar motto of respect and conservation. In fact, Tatra visitors



are prohibited from going off-trail at all, even with a permit. In addition both centers provide educational opportunities such as seminars and guided hikes as well as classes for both staff and visitors.

However, despite these efforts there are always compromises when it comes to tourism, even in the most monitored situations. According to Pilatova and Hudec, Tatra National Park experiences a different kind of tourism because there is no entrance fee. Funded entirely by the state, visitors are free to come and go as they please. However, access is limited and certain regulations are strictly enforced. At RMNP, increased tourism helps provide additional funding so the Park depends on its visitors and their satisfaction.

"We (people in Tatras) don't see revenue from tourists so there is no need to interfere," said Pilatova. "Sometimes it may be better to leave some things to nature even if it's not convenient for people."

According to Pilatova, the Tatras, for the most part, experience a very balanced eco-system. Without human interference, species have been able to live and evolve at their own pace. And, because the Tatra Mountains have managed to



Tatra chamois

retain all of their natural predators, other animal populations remain healthy, as the eco-system stays balanced. This helps avoid the inevitable rise in population that takes place once an area loses a percentage of its predators. Without these meat-eating carnivores, populations like elk and deer are free to grow. This often leads to an increase in overpopulation where new problems like starvation and disease can occur.

However, despite Tatra's ability to remain free from most forms of interference, there are still some concerns when it comes to laws and protection. For example, tree cutting is still legal in

the Tatra National Park, as is hunting.

"Here (RMNP), there is a better system of nature protection," said Pilatova. "Rocky Mountain National Park makes the final decision. In the Tatras people making the ultimate decisions are farther removed. They are focused on developing and not always on conservation."

Because ski resorts are such a big attraction in the Tatras, it is difficult for officials to prevent development. RMNP is fortunate in that all the land within the borders is protected from any kind of unnecessary development at all.

"Nature is the winner here (RMNP)," said Hudec. "Back home, sometimes nature wins."

Both Pilatova and Hudec are optimistic about the sister park agreement and hope that both parks will learn from one another. For Pilatova and Hudec that means less development and more extensive regulations and conservation efforts in Tatra National Park. Perhaps with increased efforts, exchange programs and desire both parks will continue to learn and grow towards a successful future.

For more information on Tatra National Park visit www.tanap.org. To learn more about the sister agreement between Rocky Mountain National Park and the Tatra National Parks in Slovakia and Poland, visit www.RMNP.com or call 586-1206.